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GAZETTE OPINION: HARNESSING WIND ENERGY FOR MONTANA

Montana ought to put more energy into developing financially profitable, environmentally sound wind projects.

States smaller in population or land mass are generating far more wind energy. Montana is missing out while North Dakota, Wyoming, Minnesota, Iowa and Washington are cashing in.

The potential for wind energy is vast. However, the obstacles are substantial in Montana:

- Because Montana's major electrical distribution utility doesn't own power generating facilities, it has to contract for all its power. When NorthWestern energy buys wind energy for its Montana customers, it must also buy a "firming" supply of energy to use when the wind isn't blowing. In a system with various generating facilities - especially a system with hydropower - firming would be more easily workable. Montana's deregulated energy supply creates additional challenges that demand creative solutions.
- As noted in a recent Gazette State Bureau report, large energy developments in Montana are constrained by the limited transmission line capacity in this state. Until additional transmission capacity is built, there may be no way to get more wind power to market.

Transmission lines

Fortunately, the state is starting to work on these problems:

- **Gov. Brian Schweitzer's office this summer opened a small, new state division charged with promoting energy infrastructure development.**
- The 2005 Montana Legislature enacted a law that will require utilities to get 15 percent of their energy from alternatives to fossil fuels by 2015. However, that law specifically exempted electrical cooperatives.
- This year, new laws were approved that will provide incentives to wind energy and power transmission projects.

Yet Montana must do more. The state now can generate a modest 145 megawatts of wind energy, mostly from the Judith Gap wind farm. A planned 500-megawatt wind farm

in Valley County reportedly has been downsized to 50 megawatts after nearly being scrapped. Would-be developers blame environmental objections to placing the 400-foot-tall turbines on federal lands near a wilderness study area. According to an Associated Press report, the same developer, GreenHunter Energy, also backed out of other Montana wind projects for lack of transmission capacity.

Revenue for ranchers

Perhaps, more active state coordination could have helped resolve the GreenHunter site dispute and transmission concerns. However, its new, smaller Valley County proposal would locate turbines mostly on state and private lands. Montana should especially encourage wind energy development on private land. Midwestern farmers are reaping annual rental payments from having wind turbines on their land. Montana's agriculture producers could also benefit richly. Furthermore, wind turbines on state lands would put lease proceeds into state coffers.

Serious concerns about climate change will play an increasingly important role in the U.S. energy market. Wind will be part of the answer; Montana ought to be a significant player.